

Sixty years ago there was a lot of activity around here

A FORLORN AND UNUSED LANDMARK San Francisco's Problem Spot---Aquatic Park

By KEVIN WALLACE

Sixty years ago at Aquatic Park, you could splash into Fannie Annie's or the Kelly Sisters' bathhouse, pay a dime, and emerge to splash about in a rented bathing costume, complete with flippers.

But more than \$2,000,000 and half a century of progress have been spent, transfiguring that crass old commercialism into a truly municipal, really dreamy, super swimming center.

The net result to date? Principally just dreamy.

As of yesterday, and every other yesterday for the past ten years, swimming was officially prohibited, even if you could have found a place to rent a swim suit—which you couldn't.

The "no swimming" order is disregarded, of course, by such private parties as the hearty members of nearby Ariel, Dolphin and South End Rowing and Swimming Clubs. But the park's municipal management observes the order, which was the Health Department's dismal housewarming present to Aquatic Park's magnificent casino, when it was opened on the late Mayor Rossi's birthday, January 22, 1938.

The casino, returned a year ago to the Park Commission after wartime Army use, will be reopened shortly by the Park Commission. And, once again, the Commission will consider the Health Department's edict in its answer to the intriguing old question:

"The casino is lively—but what can you do with it?"

The Health Department says Aquatic Park's waters are polluted by the Pier 37 sewage outlet—a situation which won't be remedied until the proposed Broadway sewage reduction plant is completed, a year or two hence.

Meanwhile, the Park Commission hopes to make its facilities useful to sun bathers, and to civic groups who want the casino's halls for recreational purposes.

But it has other problems. The first is financial. Since no funds were available for Aquatic Park, when the 4th Anti-Aircraft Group turned it back from war duty, the pleasure palace has had to linger under lock and key until the new fiscal year.

Tourists marvel before it—a wondrous relic from the great days of WPA, as spectacular, as opulent and as empty as any Mayan temple.

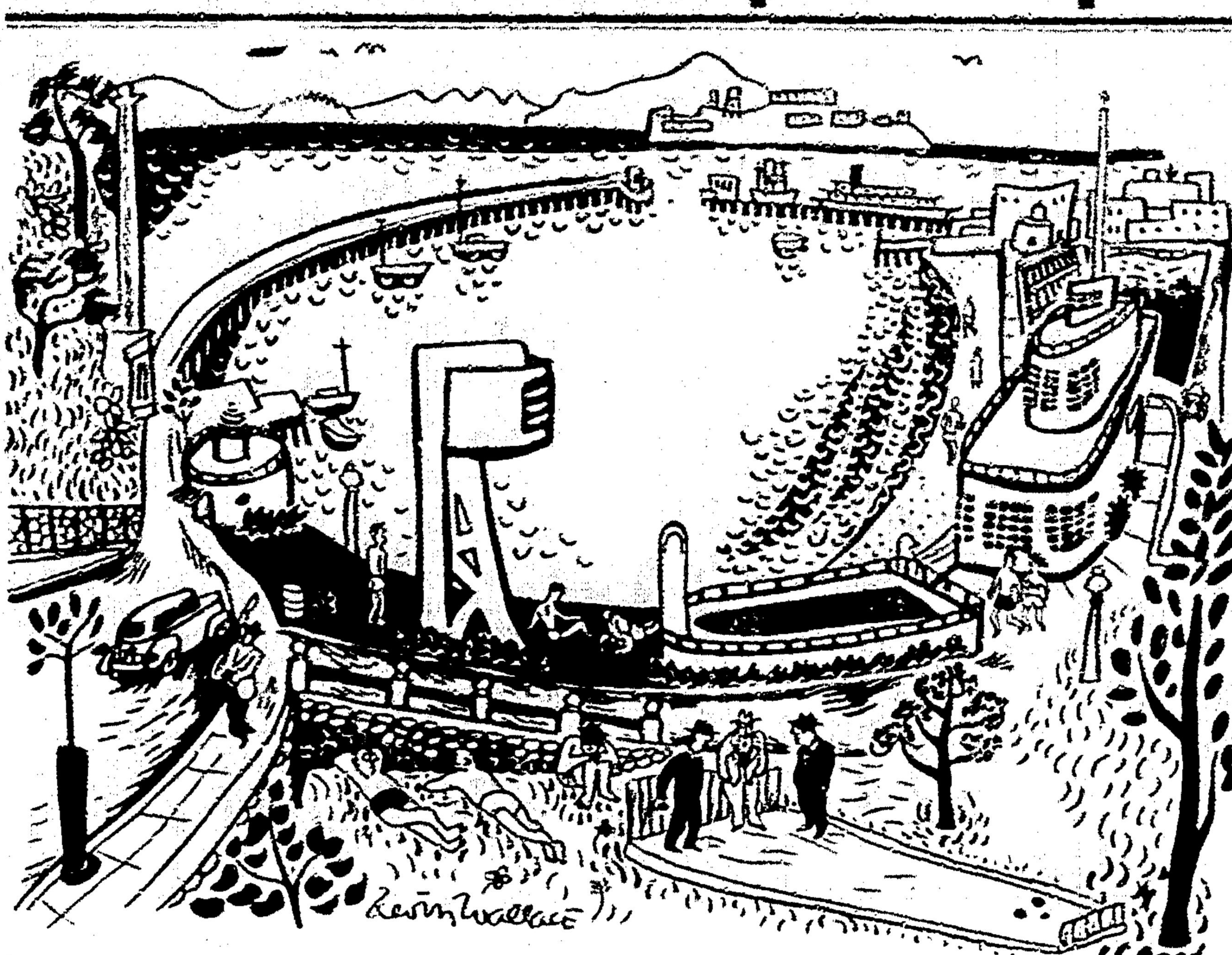
The new budget allows \$15,000 for repairs to the building—an adequate sum, inasmuch as the Army turned the pavilion back in first-rate condition.

The exterior needs a coat of whitewash, and one of Benny Bufano's granite penguins needs a new steel plate in its head, damaged by vandals. That's about all.

Likewise, the budget allows \$100,000 for new pilings along Aquatic Park pier—the fishermen's paradise, built for \$200,000 in 1932, extending like a curved big toe off the foot of Van Ness.

Tides, it seems, washed protective sands from the original pilings, and these have since been largely consumed by salt water creatures whose palates favor wood.

Unfortunately, though, the budget says nothing about paying for maintenance and operation of Aquatic Park's pavilion, including the bathhouse section, beyond pro-



Yes, My Darling Daughter, But Don't—

Here is a diagram to orient you, from left to right, around San Francisco's super swimming-pavilion-without-swimming, which will resume operations "soon."

The shrubbery at the left margin belongs to Fort Mason. The street is Van Ness Avenue, which swings on out along a \$200,000 pier—scheduled now for \$100,000 repairs—to a terminal comfort station net, alas, in operation.

At the root of the pier, you'll note the Department of Education's small boat dock, now in use by the Sea Scouts.

The round house this side of

it is another Park Commission comfort station, which shares its space with a refreshment counter, operated profitably by a concessionaire.

That big thing sticking out of the lawn—the one that looks like an outside fountain mixer—is a sound system speaker for control of the beach; alas, not in operation.

The bocce ball players and noon sun bathers, up here in the foreground, are poachers on Water Department land, also not in official use.

The central fixtures at the right

are those of the \$2,000,000 WPA Aquatic Park pavilion—modern, efficient, lavish—but, sad to say, closed. The Park Commission plans, however, to reopen it "in the next month or so."

The right-hand pier in the background is, of course, the Hyde street wharf, with the Marine Exchange lookout at the end; Barney Gould's showboat-without-a-show (as yet) alongside; and the ancient Ariel, Dolphin and South End Rowing and Swimming clubhouses at its right.

Marin county, Belvedere, Angel Island and Alcatraz are in the far background.

viding watchmen and a skeleton janitorial crew.

"First," says the Commission's recreation chief, Joe Hickey, "we'll have to make up a master plan, to be announced in the next week or so. Then we'll just start operating gradually, getting what funds we can from other parts of our department."

Opening day? Well—maybe in a month or so.

And that is the status of the Aquatic Park dream, first dreamed before the turn of the century, by members of the ancient rowing clubs named above.

The city didn't even own the land involved—on the Bay side of North Point street, between Larkin and Van Ness Avenue—when the Architectural Club awarded a prize for the first ambitious Aquatic Park design. That was 1912.

Although the original sand beach had been buried under debris, removed from Chinatown after the 1906 fire, the cove was still San Francisco's only sheltered swimming area.

In 1917, the Southern Pacific announced plans for a \$10,000,000 railway terminal on its portion of the property. Alarmed city fathers promptly bargained the land away from the railway.

In 1925, Governor Richardson ceded adjoining State tidelands to the city project. In 1928, President Coolidge ceded an erstwhile chunk of Fort Mason to the same municipal dream.

Subsequently, snips and bits of neighboring commercial property were bought for the Park Commission, which even now has an eye on the Water Department's lot at the foot of Van Ness.

Recently abandoned for development by Trader Vic, for want of a liquor license, the Water Department real estate is now used solely by poachers—noonday sun bathers and occasional bocce ball fans, who have improvised their own court.

The Park Commission would like to put a children's playground there.

In 1936, the WPA began construction of Aquatic Park's chief

filler, muralist and director of the project's dazzling stainless-steel, marble and mosaic decoration, made front pages in a row with the management, concerning esthetics. Publicists warmed to the topic—and by opening day, their estimate of costs had soared to \$2,000,000.

Assistant Parks Superintendent Bart Rolph, who recalls those days, doubts if anybody ever knew the real cost of the pavilion, but he says it was certainly a lot.

Such was the frenzy on opening day, W. A. "Bill" Hansen predicted it would be no time before the cove was fitted with pipes to circulate steam from the nearby P.G.&E. station, and keep the water tropical for swimming the year 'round.

Just a few months had passed, however, when it came out that the WPA hadn't finished the project, after all. A 14 by 17 foot mosaic mural and a pier comfort station weren't complete.

Concessionaires, who took over the casino's restaurant and bar facilities, asserted their lease didn't require them to pay rent until the building was "finished." And they didn't.

The WPA said THEY wouldn't finish the building if it was being used for private enterprise. And they didn't.

The Park Commission and the concessionaires went to court. The facilities closed down, and the WPA just gradually faded off the face of the earth.

There followed a desultory period of operating the casino's hospitality services by the Commission itself. It was getting along fine—especially the lavish bathhouse and shower section in the basement.

But then the war came along, and the pavilion became a headquarters of San Francisco's defense arrangements.

People gradually forgot about Aquatic Park.

That's why there was no money for it in the city's kitty, when the Park Commission got it back last year. That's why funds are still mighty low.

"San Francisco is going to have to discover again that it has an ideal seaside resort, ten minutes from the downtown area," Commissioner Hickey remarked yesterday.

"We're not yet certain what lines its new development will take. Some groups want the cove reserved for swimming and boating, others want to introduce power craft for fishing parties.

"We do know, however, that we'll go along with the original idea of Aquatic Park—to maintain it as a recreational center for all of San Francisco."

